Glenn A. Phelps persuasively argues that Washington's political thought influenced the principles informing the federal government then and now. Disinclined to enter the debates by which the framers hammered out a consensus, Washington instead sought to promote his way of thinking through private correspondence and the example of his public life. From these sources Phelps draws out Washington's political ideas and demonstrates that he developed a coherent and consistent view of a republican government on a continental scale long before Madison, Hamilton, and other nationalists—a view grounded in classically conservative republicanism and continentally minded commercialism. That he was only partially successful in building the constitutional system that he intended does not undercut his theoretical contribution. Even his failures affected the way our constitutional tradition developed.

Phelps examines Washington's political ideas not as they were perceived by his contemporaries but in his own words; he shows what Washington believed, not what others thought he believed. He shows how Washington's political values remained consistent over time, regardless of who his counselors were. Using letters Washington wrote to friends and family—written free from the constraints of public politics—Phelps reveals “a man with a passionate commitment to a fully developed idea of a constitutional republic on a continental scale.”

“Helps us to see how Washington became the greatest political leader the United States has produced and, arguably, the greatest leader in the entire experience of constitutional democracy. Phelps's special contribution is in showing the strength and coherence of Washington's political philosophy.”—Times Literary Supplement

“A strong argument for Washington's primary role in the formation and early development of the Constitution.”—William and Mary Quarterly

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